

Back to the Future of Television: National Center for Experiments in Television
Preservation Project Progress Report
Maria Troy and Steve Seid

MAIN, (1999)

"Long long ago, in an archive far far away..."

Like most video histories, the story of the National Center for Experiments in Television (NCET) is fragmented, buried and unknown to all but a handful of people. Fascinated by what little we knew about the Center, the two of us embarked on a preservation project to locate, preserve and exhibit tapes from the Center out of a desire to see the work and learn more. Both of us were intrigued by a far-out little book entitled *Videospace* (1972), written by NCET's founding director, Brice Howard, which outlines a radically different approach to television. Extant published information was very scant, a few articles and a few tapes distributed by EAI. We lamented that no one had unearthed the tapes or interviewed the key players. So, in true Andy Hardy fashion, we decided to do it ourselves.

NCET was established in 1967 at KQED in San Francisco as the first of the experimental television laboratories funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The TV Labs at WNET (New York) and WGBH (Boston) were soon to follow. Unlike the material from and on the NCET, the legacy of the latter two centers is well-established for any number of reasons: WNET and WGBH were both on the East Coast; they focused on productions with more or less established artists and had high-profile series on national PBS; they were more integrated into the public television network and enjoyed more favor with their home stations; and maybe most importantly, their archives were, for the most part, retained.

The work done at the Center was very unique. Influenced by and reflecting the countercultural spirit of the times, the west coast Lab was concerned with reinventing the visual language of television by concentrating on the electronic pulse and flat screen, and imagining the screen surface as a place that was anti-illusionistic, more a canvas. Pursuing this vision largely through the use of image-processors (mixers, keyers, colorizers, etc.), NCET returned to the raw materials of television to further undermine programming conventions by infusing them with the characteristics of not just radio transcribed to TV, but the arts in general: literary, painterly, choreographic, and dramaturgical. From the start, the vision of NCET was multi-disciplinary. Privileging process over product, part of NCET's mission was to bring public television writers, directors, and executives a new vision of what television could be through internships that involved working with artists and experimenting with the medium directly.

Very generally, there have been a few stumbling blocks encountered during our research that may be common to all video history projects (if not histories of obscure subject matter in general). Early on it became obvious that this video history, as largely

unwritten, was necessarily an oral history. There is no central archive of NCET tapes or print documents, though we have gathered information on about 420 tapes of various generations - 3/4", 2", and 1" – from the archives of Southern Methodist University, Media Study/ Buffalo (now in the possession of Woody and Steina Vasulka), Stanford University, and University of California, Berkeley. Since NCET had split off from KQED rather early on, San Francisco's public television station had nothing. These collections were uncatalogued; only the Media Study/Buffalo group even had a title list. Information again was had through word of mouth and creative researching.

Archives will often have materials that are overlooked or unrelated to the main focus of their collection. When we went to visit the archives of Southern Methodist University, we were told there were about 30 2" quad tapes related to NCET in a collection that is primarily devoted to early Hollywood films. The tapes were uncatalogued but stored in a temperature and humidity controlled vault. There was no provenance or print records on the tapes. We contacted David Dowe, a former NCET intern, who, it turns out, drove the tapes from San Francisco to Dallas in 1975 when KQED was planning to deaccession (i.e. dump) them. Looking at the tapes it was clear that they had KQED catalog numbers (sometimes that is all they had), there were closer to sixty 2" tapes, and some were the masters, while others were dubs from original 3/4" masters. David Dowe provided anecdotal information about certain tapes, about the process used to gather source material, and how the artists and public TV interns worked together.

In many ways we were lucky to find anything at all. Because the tapes are obsolete, not only technically (as with the 2" quad and old 1" copies), but in the judgment of some, surely aesthetically obsolete as well. Image-processed video turned out to be something of an artistic cul-de-sac, with many fervent practitioners and few advocates. NCET seems to have been a scene unto itself, isolated even from other San Francisco video artists working at the same time, such as Video Free America and Optic Nerve. Its production was not safely "public television" nor was it accepted as "art work." The very interdisciplinarity that makes NCET's work so interesting threatened its status from the very start: who was the main audience? What type of institution should take ownership of this work? To what category should it be assigned? How would a researcher, not knowing exactly what they are looking for, stumble onto it?

Our process began with trying to find key players, artists and administrators of NCET who were still around, and talk to them about where tapes were, and what their memories of the Center were. Scratching below the surface, we found a wealth of material. And yet with no overarching schematic, it is difficult to know what relevance to ascribe to one or another piece of information: do we deliberately assign '90s priorities based on what work appeals to our sensibilities now? Do we gather input from the artists as to what were their favorite works? Do we rely on scant or non-existent public television records as far as what works were broadcast, or screened to the large audience? Throughout, and in the end, we hope to rely on all three strategies.

Part of our objective in this project is to catalog and preserve as much work as possible from NCET, so that this information and these art works are available to future

researchers with different priorities and perspectives. In order to draw attention to the work done at the Center, we are planning to curate a touring exhibition of selected preserved tapes so that people can see the work and draw their own conclusions. At this writing, we have just begun the long process of preserving and reviewing works. We are poised at a tantalizing moment and we don't know exactly what we will find.

Maria Troy was an Associate Curator of Media Art at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, OH.

Steve Seid is Video Curator at the Pacific Film Archive at the University of California at Berkeley.